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RONALD J. DUNLAVEY

MR. NIXON'S RETURN TO PEKING

ANNCR: VOA NEWS ANALYST RONALD J. DUNLAVEY DISCUSSES THE ANNOUNCED VISIT TO PEKING OF FORMER PRESIDENT RICHARD NIXON: VOICE:

IT WAS JUST FOUR YEARS AGO THIS MONTH THAT THE THEN PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES, RICHARD NIXON, MADE HIS HISTORIC JOURNEY TO THE PEOPLES' REPUBLIC OF CHINA. IT WAS HISTORIC BECAUSE THERE HAD BEEN VIRTUALLY NO RELATION BETWEEN THE TWO COUNTRIES SINCE THE COMMUNIST GOVERNMENT CAME INTO POWER IN CHINA ALMOST A QUARTER OF A CENTURY EARLIER. THE NIXON VISIT USHERED IN A NEW ERA OF CHINESE-AMERICAN RELATIONS, AND CULMINATED IN THE ISSUANCE OF THE SHANGHAI COMMUNIQUE, WHICH LAID DOWN GUIDELINES FOR CLOSER RELATIONS BETWEEN WASHINGTON AND PEKING.

NOW RICHARD NIXON IS GOING BACK TO CHINA. ---THIS TIME AS A PRIVATE CITIZEN PAYING A PRIVATE VISIT. ACCORDING TO AN ANNOUNCEMENT MADE LAST WEEK HE AND MRS. NIXON WILL ARRIVE IN PEKING ON FEBRUARY TWENTY-FIRST. THAT'S EXACTLY FOUR YEARS TO THE DAY SINCE HIS FIRST ARRIVAL IN THE CHINESE CAPITAL.

THE ANNOUNCEMENT SET OFF A PREDICTABLE BURST OF PRESS SPECULATION ABOUT THE POSSIBLE REASONS FOR THE TRIP. THE FACT THAT IT COMES ON THE ANNIVERSARY OF THE NINETEEN SEVENTY-TWO VISIT---AND IS BEING MADE AT THE INVITATION OF THE CHINESE GOVERNMENT---HAS PROMPTED SOME OBSERVERS TO DETECT POLITICAL OVERTONES. ONE SEES IT AS AN INDIRECT CHINESE CRITICISM OF AMERICAN DETENTE POLICY---WITH WHICH PEKING HAS EXPRESSED DISCONTENT IN THE PAST. ANOTHER SEES IT AS A DECISION BY THE CHINESE LEADERSHIP TO EMPHASIZE CHINA'S "DIPLOMATIC CONTINUITY." THERE ARE THOSE, TOO, WHO SEE THE TRIP AS HAVING A POSSIBLE IMPACT ON AMERICAN DOMESTIC POLITICS IN THIS PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION YEAR. AND THEN

THERE ARE THOSE WHO SEE THE TRIP AS BEING MADE LARGELY FOR PERSONAL AND SENTIMENTAL REASONS.

IN ANY EVENT, THE JOURNEY TO PEKING MEANS THAT MR. NIXON APPARENTLY HAS REGAINED HIS HEALTH, AND WILL BE EMERGING AT LAST FROM HIS EIGHTEEN-MONTH PERIOD OF SECLUSION. WHETHER THIS EMERGENCE IS TEMPORARY---OR WHETHER MR. NIXON IS SIGNALLING THE BEGINNING OF A NEW AND MORE ACTIVE PHASE OF HIS CAREER---IS SOMETHING THAT THE POLITICAL PUNDITS WILL HAVE TO DECIDE. MEAN-TIME, IT CONTINUES TO BE OBVIOUS THAT, ALTHOUGH RICHARD NIXON MAY HAVE LOST THE PRESIDENCY, HE HAS CERTAINLY NOT LOST HIS ABILITY TO GENERATE NEWS.